
S. WEIR MITCHELL

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Assistant Physician to the Infirmary for

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FIG. 1.—Dr. S. Weir Mitchell's clinic at the Infirmary for Nervous Diseases, Philadelphia, January, 1902.

S. WEIR MITCHELL, M.D., LL.D.

BY GUY HINSDALE, A.M., M.D.,

Assistant Physician to the Infirmary for Nervous Diseases.

DR. WEIR MITCHELL's career as an army surgeon is one of the most interesting chapters in the record of an eventful life. In May, 1863, Dr. William A. Hammond, who was then Surgeon-General of the United States Army, on the request of Dr. Mitchell, ordered Dr. Mitchell and Dr. George R. Morehouse to take charge of a hospital for soldiers suffering from nervous diseases. At first the patients belonging to this class were assigned to separate wards in the hospital on Christian Street between Ninth and Tenth Streets in Philadelphia. The scope of the hospital was soon enlarged so as to include patients suffering from injuries of the nerves. This hospital becoming insufficient, a new hospital, with a capacity of four hundred beds, was created in Turner's Lane, corresponding to what is now Nineteenth Street and Columbia Avenue, Philadelphia. Surgeons Charles H. Alden, U.S.A., and William W. Keen, U.S.A., were put in charge, and the Surgeon-General wisely left the surgeons free to devote their entire time to the treatment of patients, relieving them of most of the administrative duties usually connected with army hospitals. Dr. Hammond, when he left office, had established special wards or hospitals for diseases of the eye, for syphilis, for stumps, for diseases of the heart and lungs, and in this way vastly promoted the interests of the wounded and sick soldier, as well as those of science.

The Turner's Lane hospital received a multitude of cases representing almost every conceivable type of obscure nervous disease. The medical inspectors forwarded from various fields and hospitals

a vast number of cases of wounds and contusions, including rare forms of nerve lesion of almost every great nerve in the body.

Few persons have ever at any time had such an opportunity for study, and the mass of material presented was not neglected from any stand-point. The responsibility involved in the possession of an experience so unusual was conscientiously met. Careful histories of every case were taken personally by the surgeons in charge and were methodically continued until the patient was discharged. Two thousand pages of notes were thus recorded in two years and formed the foundation of many valuable publications. The physicians to whom fell this unique chance had the spirit of Lord Bacon, who said, "I hold every man a debtor to his profession; from the which as men of course do seek to receive countenance and profit, so ought they of duty to endeavor themselves, by way of amends, to be a help and ornament thereunto."

Two important papers soon appeared as a result of the service at Turner's Lane hospital,—one on "Reflex Paralysis" (Circular No. VI., Surgeon-General's office, 1864), by Mitchell, Morehouse, and Keen, which records cases of sudden palsy, the result of wounds in remote regions of the body; and a paper on "The Antagonism of Morphia and Atropia," by Mitchell, Morehouse, and Keen.

At that time (1864-65) hypodermic medication was somewhat novel, and in the terrible burning pain following injuries to nerves, which Dr. Mitchell described under the name of "causalgia," ample use was made of hypodermic injections. It was found that the subcutaneous administration of morphine in that affection was more rapid and useful if made near the site of the pain. The combined use of atropine and morphine was here first suggested, and has since been unanimously adopted in daily practice. The effects of each drug used alone were studied, then of the two together, their antagonisms made clear, and also their agreements in action and in a common tendency to enfeeble the bladder. The narcosis of morphine is lessened by the presence of atropine, but its analgesic power is unaltered.

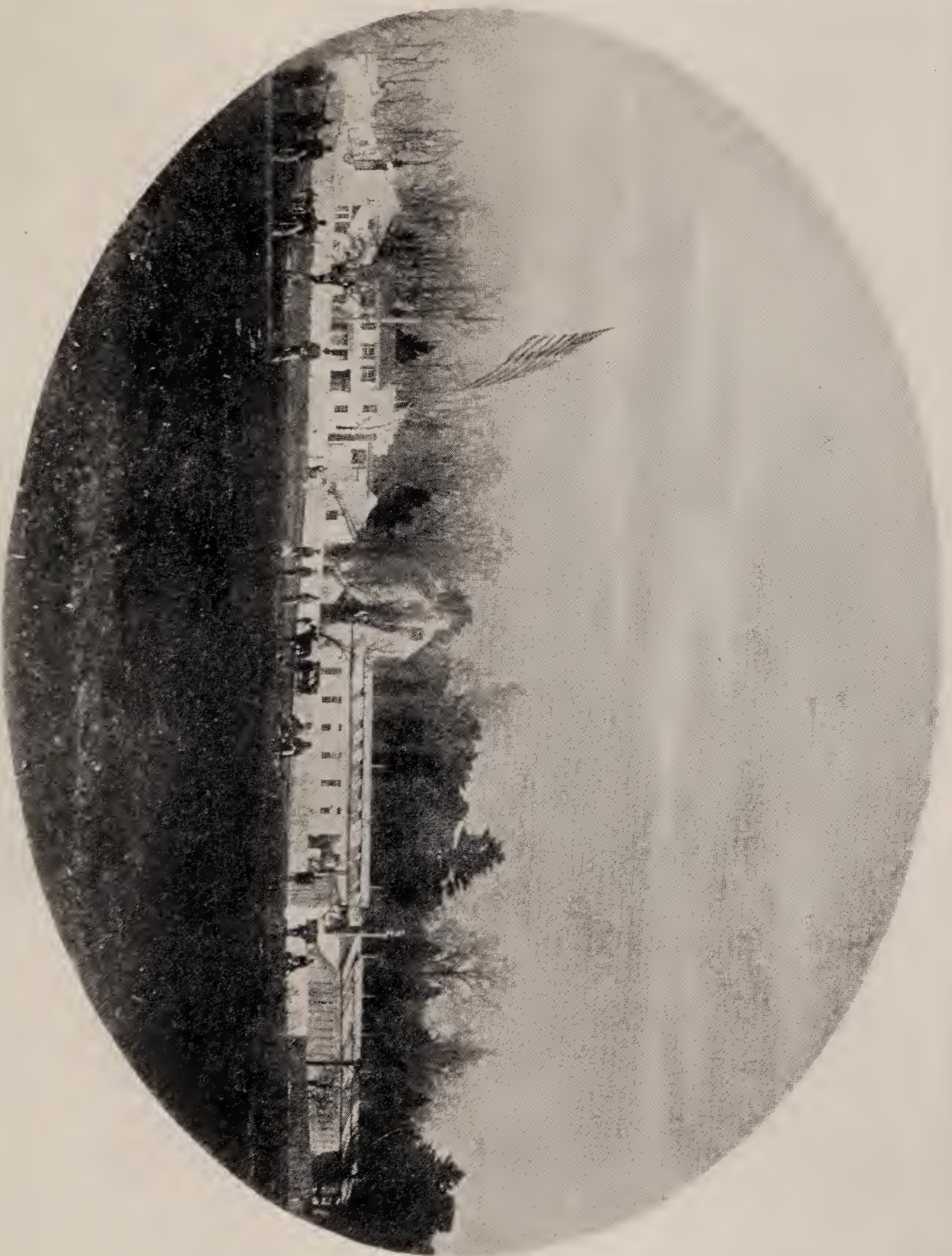


FIG. 2.—United States Army Hospital for Injuries and Diseases of the Nervous System at Turner's Lane, Philadelphia, 1864.



FIG. 3.—Dr. S. Weir Mitchell. (From a photograph taken during the Civil War.)

A remarkable paper on "Malingering" was among the interesting products of this period. It was written by Drs. Keen, Mitchell, and Morehouse. An important book followed,—*"Gunshot Wounds and other Injuries of Nerves,"* by Mitchell, Morehouse, and Keen, in 1864; *"Injuries of Nerves and their Consequences,"* by S. Weir Mitchell, 1872, sums up all the later knowledge.

The remote after history of the soldier patients suffering from nerve wounds has been an interesting and untouched study, attended by all sorts of difficulties. Dr. John K. Mitchell has succeeded in securing the history of many of these Civil War cases and recorded them in a volume, published in 1895, entitled *"Remote Consequences of Injuries of Nerves and their Treatment."* This record is of singular value and is not confined to a study of the Turner's Lane hospital patients.

Although nearly forty years have passed, now and then a veteran of the Civil War, who remembers the faithful service in the army hospital, returns for advice, and never fails to find a welcome and a kind word of encouragement at the Infirmary for Nervous Diseases. Here Dr. Mitchell for the last thirty years has held a clinic on Friday afternoons.

Dr. Mitchell's influence on younger men in the profession has been a marked characteristic. Many a medical student has found in him a sympathetic and helpful friend. Dr. Mitchell is constantly suggesting to younger men new fields of labor and instinctively knows the lines upon which investigations may be profitably pursued. Many of these have been reported with his collaborators to the National Academy of Science, the highest scientific body in America.

The titles of Dr. Mitchell's contributions to physiology and medicine number about one hundred and forty. He has published a number of novels and volumes of poems. He holds the belief that a physician in active practice may do what else he pleases, provided that his medical life and works assure him of his competence. For

this emancipating example and influence the profession owes him a grateful acknowledgment.

[NOTE.—The illustrations show Dr. Mitchell examining one of his patients of war time, a man who had a gunshot wound of the median nerve (Fig. 1), the Turner's Lane hospital of Philadelphia (Fig. 2), and a photograph of Dr. Mitchell (Fig. 3) taken during the Civil War.]

